# RAMGAL VALLEY ;-WESTERN NURISTAN

## Regional development report

**(November 1995)**

**M.D.PARSONS**




**This report** was produced while the author was working with SERVE, PO Box 477, Peshawar, Pakistan. The author is now working with O.R.A., PO Box 594, Peshawar, Pakistan.

# CONTENTS


-Basis for the report

-Introduction

-Geography

-Settlement

-Economy/Agriculture/Trade

-Access

-Political history

-Language and Education

-Diet

-Nutritional status of children

-Medical

-Water supply and sanitation

-CONCLUSIONS

-Appendix

## BASIS FOR THE REPORT

A survey trip to Ramgal valley by two expatriates and one Afghan co-worker in september 1995,-in order to conduct a child nutritional status survey for under five year olds. Published sources relating to other parts of Nuristan are referred to where appropriate;- however the amount of published data based on first hand experience of Ramgal itself,- is practically nil. This being due to the complete absence of any development survey work having taken place there before.

## INTRODUCTION

Nuristan is a distinct ethnic and linguistic region within North-East Afghanistan,- occupying four major North-South running river valleys on the southern slopes of The Hindu Kush mountains.[1] Various proposals have been made as to the origin of the Nuristanis,- including possible descent from the army of Alexander the Great. However, there appears to be a still more ancient origin with some areas having been settled thousands of years ago. It seems probable that there is no one single explanation for the origin of all of the Nuristanis.[2] Undoubtedly there are indo-European,- notably greek- cultural features. However there would appear to have once been a broadly similar culture from Ramgal valley in the west to the area now occupied by the Pashai to the south, streching as far as Swat and probably Kashmir in the East. Prior to the advent of islam the Nuristanis practised an animistic form of religion with a pantheon of gods and nature spirits.[3] They were forcibly converted to islam by Amir Abdur Rahman Khan following the Durrand agreement on the Frontier with British India in 1895.[4] The effect of Abdur Rahman's invasion was the

---

1) The valleys being (West to East) Ramgal-Kulam; Kantiwar-Presun-Pech; Waigal; and Bashgal.
2) Thus L.Klimerg, *"Male-female polarity symbolism in kafir art and religion"*, East aand West, 26, (1976),pp479-488; notes possible links of Laghman Nuristan (presumably meaning Ramgal and Kulam valleys) with the ancient indian concept of *Uddiyana*. He also noted that when Alexander's army passed through,-some of the tribes in the region sent hima delegation claiming an existing common greek origin,- as a result of which Alexander did NOT conquer them. It should also be noted that whilst earlier linguistic work, eg:- Sir George Grierson, Linguistic survey of India, (1919),- grouped all of the languages from Ramgal to Kashmir under the heading *Dardic* .However G.Morgensterne *"Report ,on a linguistic mission to North-Western India"*,ISK,series C111-1,Oslo(1932).- showed that the Nuristani languages were distinct from the rest; For a concise summary of this see,- R.Strand, *"Notes on the Nuristani and Dardic languages"*, Journal of the American Oriental Society, 93,(1973), pp297-303. Even within the area termed *"Kafiristan"* prior to their forcible conversion to islam 100 years ago, Sir George Robertson, Kafirs of the Hindu Kush, pp4-5,159,- noted cultural differences between the Kalash and the rest of Kafiristan.
3) Klimberg (op cit), argued that the effect of islam was to simply replace the head of the pantheon with *ALLAH* as the only "God",- whilst keeping the rest of the worldview intact. Thus Imra,- formerly head of the pantheon,-became the death spirit.Jetmar Zur mythologie der prasun kafiren ,(english translation) 1986, p36ff,- seems to imply a similar idea. In our survey work we were unable to verify this in Ramgal. However 1) the tribes of Nuristan are isolated from each other by steep mountain ridges and as we noted earlier there are probably a range of different Nuristani origins. 2) These writers based their research almost exclusivly on other (more accessable) areas of Nuristan. 3) Our afghan co-worker who came from Waigal in central Nuristan, observed significant cultural differences between Ramgal and his own area of Nuristan. 4) Whilst it is unlikely that islam immediately replaced the entire animistic worldview,- some elements of present day culture in Ramgal are inconsistent with this worldview eg:- the significant consumption of fish in Lower Ramgal,-considered impure according to the worldview described by Jetmar and Klimberg.
The reason for the inclusion of these comments in this report, (-and their significance for development work,- is that the cultural anthropology described in many existing published sources,- based as they are on other parts of Nuristan in the past;- may not be a sound basis on which to make decisions regarding development work now in Western Nuristan.
4) This agreement isolated the Kalash of Chitral from the rest of Kafiristan. Consequently, the Kalash in British India remained animistic. Whilst the kafirs of Afghanistan were invaded and forcibly converted to islam by Abdur Rahman and their name changed from *Kafiristan* (meaning "land of the infidel") to *Nuristan* (meaning "land of heavenly light").

forcible conversion of the majority of the population,-whilst a small number fled to Chitral.[5]
Significantly, Ramgal valley in the extreme west of Nuristan,- held out for four years after the submission of the other areas,- before they too submitted to islam.[6]

## GEOGRAPHY

"*NURISTAN*" is a term that is sometimes loosely used to refer to a broad area west of the Panjshir valley and as far as Pakistan and including at least some of the Pashai areas such as the Alingar valley.[7] In this report the term "*Nurlstan*" only refers to the area that amy be more strictly termed "Nuristan".ie; that area east of the Panjshir valley formerly called "*kafiristan*" which was converted to islam and renamed "*Nuristan*" following the invasions of Abdur Rahman Khan 1896-1900.

This area covers the four North-South running river valleys of the Ramgal-Kulam; Kantiwar-Presun-Pech; Waigal and Bashgal. However it should be noted that the geographical extent of Nuristan is primarily defined in terms of anthropology[8] rather than of physical geography.

However, physical geography has an immense influence on the area;- Culturally with steep,high mountain ridges dividing parallel valleys, making East-West communications very difficult.[9] In terms of development, it has made the ara largely inaccessable to NGO's. Consequently, development work has been concentrated on the more accessable lowland regions in the south such as Kamdesh and Waigal.

"*RAMGAL VALLEY*" itself is the most North-Westerly of the Nuristani valleys and also the most inaccessable. It is noteworthy that not only does it not have a single development project,- but NGO's that have considered working there have decided against it due to its inaccessability.

Geographically, Ramgal valley is divided into two parts by Lake Mandal,- a post glacial lake dammed by the terminal morraine of a former glacier. We estimated this lake to be approxamately one and a half miles long by half a mile wide. Below the lake is a narrow "V" shaped valley cut down by the river, which consequently has very little land available for cultivation. The track up this part of the valley is narrow and forced to constantly ascend and descend the steep and high valley sides. In contrast, Upper Ramgal,- above the lake is a wider flatter "U" shaped valley cut by a former glacier,- consequently much more land is available for arable cultivation[10].Meadowlands and small plantations of timber also exist. Paths are generally wide and along the valley floor. Air temperatures are noticably a few degrees cooler in Upper Ramgal and this results in some variation in the type of fruit that can be grown. Normal maximum winter snowfall in the upper valley is thigh deep as opposed to the knee-calf height depths,- as found in the lower valley.

We made no direct examination of soil types, however in Lower Ramgal the soils appeared to be grey, dry, dusty soils that probably lacked significant organic content. At most places, lack of agricultural land with an adequete water supply was a frequently expressed problem. In Upper Ramgal the soils probably had a somewhat higher organic content and even slopes some distance from the river had fairly good grass coverage if there were springs in the vincinity[11]

---

5) Where Kati speakers still exist in the Northern Bomboret valley,- otherwise occupied by the Kalash tribe.

6) Dr.Yousaf Nuristani, personal communication, august 1995. Whilst in Ramgal we saw some evidence to corroborate this,- in Upper Ramgal valley, near the village of Atara, we were shown a large rock outcrop and told that on it a large number of mullahs were beheaded during the period of resistence.

7) On arrival at the village of Nangaradj,- we were invited to a feast to mark the first anniversary of the death of the mother of one of the village leaders (-a "classsic" Nuristani custom, -cf Robertson (op cit). We were told that all the people there were Nuristani. In fact that the people here are Pashai,- a group undoubtedly originally culturally related to the Nuristanis,- who were converted to islam approxamately 600 years ago. Morgensterne (op cit) however placed the Pashai language in the Dardic rather than the Nuristani language grouping.

8) and to an extent linguistically, cf Strand (op cit).

9) This is probably a significant factor causing dialect variations.

10) and for sports such as buzkashi and tentpegging once the autumn crops have been cleared!

11) Night soil is spread annually on the fields,- any development work seeking to change this practice would need to provide an alternative organic input to the soil or risk possible crop failure. Set

## SETTLEMENT

Settlement is mainly in small nucleated settlements close to water supply and adequete agricultural land. In Lower Ramgal houses tend to be more closely clustered together as they are of necessity sited on non productive agricultural land. However in Upper Ramgal there tends to be greater spacing between individual houses,- each dwelling being actually sited on the householder's farmland. In Upper Ramgal some reasonably large villages do occur on the lower valley sides well away from the main river,- provided that there is adequete water supply (a combination of spring water and irrigation channels). However in Lower Ramgal springs on the slopes appear to be relatively few and deliver fairly limited amounts of water. Consequently settlements above the main valley are fewer and much smaller, only occuring where adequete water can be found,- often some considerable distance up the mountainside or side valleys. Politically, these appear to function at least in some measure as daughter settlements of the larger village in the valley bottom.

Houses are normally constructed of large stones collected from the valley floor and plastered inside with dried mud.[12]

Settlements along the main river vary in size from 12 households (eg kowrez in Lower Ramgal) to approxamately 800 (Pushal in Upper Ramgal,- representing an estimated 6,000 people). Although the latter village,- is actually a collection of five adjacent villages with a common system of government.

On the basis of this information we estimate the total population of Ramgal valley to be approxamately 20-30,000 people.

## ECONOMY/AGRICULTURE AND TRADE

The whole of Ramgal valley is primarily a subsistence economy with little actual money circulating. The Ramgalis are pricipally mounatain herders keeping mainly goats,- although a few cows, sheep and chickens are also kept. A transhumance system operates whereby the flocks are taken to the upper pastures during the summer months and return in october. The men take turns for twenty days at a time to look after these flocks.

Corn on the cob is grown on irrigated fields near to the river. Generally each household grows its own food, although a small number of families have no land of their own and so have to work for other families..

In Uppper Rangal both fruit and timber trees are privately owned, we were however told that anyone could pick the fruit. In Lower Ramgal, we were told that the fruit trees were collectively owned by the village.

There are no shops at all in the whole of Ramgal Valley (the nearest shop being at Gandalabag in the upper Alingar valley). However a few men operate on a part time basis as artisans (combined with farming),- specialising in making a particular artefact for their region, eg. blacksmiths or carvers of wooden waterwheels etc[13].

Afghanis are used to buy goods such as toshaks, household and electrical goods, sugar, tea and medicine from Meterlam and Kabul. Surplus produce such as walnuts are taken down the valley to be sold in Meterlam. Trade also occurs with Kabul via the Arayu pass, although Meterlam seems to be preferred. ,- and is the only route at all passable in winter. Afghanis are also brought into the valley by Ramgalis who have left the area to find work in centres such as Kabul or Meterlam and either return after a few years or visit from time to time. Goats are also sometimes used as a unit of exchange ( eg in calculating the bride price) although house prices tend to be in afghanis. [14]

---

12) This contrasts with the frequently made comments in published literature to the effect that Nuristani culture is a wood based culture. Comments that reflect the fact that with the exceptions of Newby (1956),A short walk in the Hindu Kush, Picador, and Thesiger (1957) Journal of the Royal Geographical Society ,London, Dec 1957, none of the writers of these papers actually visited Ramgal. It is undoubtedly true that houses in many other parts of Nuristan are primarily made of (often ornate) wooden construction. However the lack of widespread forest cover and the abundance of boulders washed down by the Ramgal river in times of spate, account for many of these differences with the rest of Nuristan. This is another reminder not to base development plans purely on published data

13) We saw no evidence of the *atrozan* ("freeholder",- allowed to own goats)/ *bari* ("former slaves",- not allowed to own goats but forming the artisan class. In fact the above evidence points strongly against it

## ACCESS

Access presents THE major obstacle to development in Western Nuristan. The main land routes are firstly,- up the Alingar valley from Meterlam into the southern end of either Ramgal or Kulam valleys and secondly from the Panjshir valley by way of the Arayu pass that enters Upper Ramgal just above the village of Mandul. Both of these routes are used by Ramgalis for trade purposes (with Meterlam and Kabul respectively). However the Arayu Pass is not used in winter due to the depth of snow. The Alingar route is used with difficulty in winter by Ramgali men,- the snow being thigh deep in Upper Ramgal and Knee to calf deep in Lower Ramgal. The path in Upper Ramgal is relatively flat and generally close to river level. Below Lake Mandal however, the paths are steep and narrow, constantly zig-zaging between the top and the bottom of the steep valley sides. This coupled with relatively thin air makes walking strenuous and the carrying of any significant loads impossible.[15] Nuristanis manage to complete the journey from Pushal in Upper Ramgal to Meterlam on foot in about four days,- probably taking longer if they bring a donkey down with them on which to carry goods that they have purchased in the bazaar. Sick people carried on a donkey normally take approxamately one and a half weeks to reach the nearest doctor,- in Meterlam. Outsiders should allow an absoloute minimum of 5-7 days to complete the journey.[16]

During the time of the Daud republic, a road was constructed from Meterlam in the south to a few miles south of Piar in the Alingar valley (Immediately beyond which Ramgal and Kulam valleys start). This road is currently blocked about a mile beyond Gandalabug and in a very poor state of repair below that. It is however passable up to Gandalabug by large wheeled four wheel drive vehicles.[17] Below Nangaradj the road can be travelled from Meterlam by Jeeps and pickups with standard size wheels in approxamately two hours..

- The lack of road access is almost certainly the major reason for the total lack of any development projects having taken place in Western Nuristan and the disinclination of NGO's to work there. We were continually being told "we have no hospital, no clinic, no schools, no road". We were also told that during the time of the Najibullah government, when a former Ramgali resident was a cabinet minister in Kabul,- government helicopters used to land weekly bringing in supplies near his village in Upper Ramgal. This had however ceased four years earlier.

Ultimately there is clearly a need for road building within Ramgal itself,- so that infrastructure can be developed within the valley itself. However repairing the former road along the Alingar valley as far as the start of Ramgal and Kulam valleys would have a major impact on the potential for development of Ramgal and the liklihood of other NGO's being prepared to work there in the future.

## POLITICAL HISTORY

Historically, Nuristan has always been somewhat isolated from events in the rest of Afghanistan due to its remoteness and inaccessability. This is particularly true in Ramgal valley. Although a number of Nuristanis who have been educated outside of Nuristan have risen to hold important government posts,- up to cabinet level, this appears to have had little if any impact on Ramgal valley itself.

---

14) In Pushal,construction of a typical house cost approxamately one lakh Afghanis,- probably reflecting relatively rapid and simple construction. However a single ornately carved window or door could cost up to one and a half lakh afghanis.

15) We were constantly forced to take short rest breaks due to being in a state of physical exhaustion. Our Nuristani guides constantly pointed out the folly of carrying such heavy loads,-even though by European standards our rucksacks were not particularly heavy. Eventually we gave away about a third of the contents of our rucksacks as we believed that this was the only way that we would physically be able to complete the journey.

16) Our journey to Pushal actually took one and a half weeks due to having to rest for a day due to physical exhaustion and constantly having to spend sometimes substantial amounts of time with the leaders of the villages that we stayed at. Our return journey was however completed in five days due to being lent a donkey to carry our baggage for part of the journey and being able to hire transport at Gandalabag in the Alishang valley.

17) On our return journey we were able to hire a large wheeled former soviet army lorry which is kept there. The state of the road is indicated by the fact that the journey to Nangaradj,- the next Pashai village,- a distance of appoxamately 12-15 miles took two hours.

Travelling towards Ramgal from Meterlam, the furthest extent of effective control of the shura at Meterlam (Hezb-i-islami) appears to be the village of Nangaradj,- at the start of the Upper Alingar valley. At Gandalabag,- the next village and furthest passable point on the road there is a mixture of Hezb-i-islami and Jamiat. From this point on until the upper point of the Alingar valley at Piar, some villages are Jamiat and some Hezb-i-islami. Piar itself being the latter. Above Piar, in Ramgal valley itself we were told that the area is nominally alligned with Jamiat,- however in practice only a few individuals in each village belong to any one party, indeed some families may have both Hezb-i-islami and Jamiat members within them. However neither the Welayat at Meterlam nor the Kabul Government appear to have any real influence or control here. Each village has it's own leadership structure,- either a headman or a shura and is independent of other villages although the influence of one headman may extend much further than his own village.[18] This does however mean that there is no real security on the roads between individual villages.[19]

Ramgalis are proud of the fact that the anti-communist jihad began in their valley,- led by the mullah of Gizim in Upper Ramgal shortly after the communist government was installed in Kabul. Initially a government army base in the Upper Alingar valley was destroyed. However by the time of the soviet invasion and the spread of the jihad to rest of Afghanistan, Ramgal seems to have taken no further part in the war. Consequently Ramgal is probably one of the very few places in Afghanistan today to have been totally unaffected by the soviet war.[20] This makes Ramgal valley a unique situation in terms of development work in Afghanistan. The essential need is for the development of initial infrastructure (health, education, roads etc.),- rather than reconstruction of destroyed facilities, because the people quite simply have never had any facilities.

Other parts of Nuristan have sometimes in the past received a certain amount of development assistance. Often this has been from arab sources and tied to the acceptance by the people of a strict fundamentalist form of wahabi islam. Where this wahabi influence exists, workers with western related agencies have found their work severely hampered due to a strong and sometimes aggressive anti western feeling.[21] This wahabi influence and its related anti western feeling has however not spread as far west as Ramgal valley,- and the Ramgalis are very open to any form of development assisitance from outside agencies. We were frequently told "We have no hospital, no clinic, no schools, no roads,- you are the first people who have ever come here to help us"

## LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

It is generally recognised that the languages of Nuristan form a distinct subgroup within the Indo-Iranian sub group of the larger Indo-European language family.[22] The most up to date survey of the languages of Nuristan is that by Strand (1973) based on data collected 1967-69.[23] Strand's map suggests that there are four major languages in Nuristan;- Ashkun in the west central southern region ( approx 15 % of the land area of Nuristan), Kalasha-ala[24] in east central Nuristan (approx 15%),Wasi-weri in North central Nuristan and Kati in both western and eastern Nuristan covering almost all of the remaining 60% of the land area.[25] Kati, according to strand has three major dialects,- Katerviri, Mumviri and Kamviri

Kamviri is spoken in the vincinity of Kamdesh in S.East Nuristan (and is therefore sometimes referred to as Kamdeshi). Mumviri is a transitional dialect between Kamviri and Katerviri and is only spoken in Landay Sin,- a small river basinadjacent to the Kamviri area. Katerviri however, is spoken over a much.

---

18) A case in point is the village of Atara in Upper Ramgal where the headman was away in Pushal (3 hours walk further up the valley) as he had been asked by the people of Pushal to "judge" a case involving some thieves who had come there from Badakhshan.

19) We found that the personal standing of the man who either accompanied us or sent a guide with us (either a headman or a repected mullah) was our safest protection against thieves. However we were told that whilst it was well known which persons were thieves,- the lack of any legal infrastructure operating between villages prevents any action being taken against them.

20) In contrast with the adjacent Alingar valley we were told that the hills of Ramgal are not mined and we saw no evidence at all of either war injuries or destruction.

21) cf the experience in central Nuristan of Kathleen Cita a medical doctor who reported that she was "repeatedly physically threatened by some of the wahabis who were trying to force us out." Kathleen Cita, Report of a vaccination programme in Nuristan summer 1987.

wider area,-probably around 50-55% of Nuristan. Whilst Katerviri is divided up into two major sub dialects (Eastern and Western Katerviri), the limited amount of field research that we were able to do suggests that these are mutually comprehensible to a high degree.[26] We were also able to confirm the boundary between the Pashai speaking area and the Kati speaking area in the North West.[27] We were also told of minor variations in language between Kulam and Ramgal valleys,- however these do not appear to create communication problems.

It would thus appear that the commonly held view of Nuristan as a maze of mutually unintelligible languages is inaccurate. With minor variations a common language,- Kati is probably spoken in around 55% of the area. The people of Ramgal display marked enthusiasm for anything in their mother tounge which they refer to as /katǝi/. On hearing a dialect survey tape in Kati they were showed great interest and enthusiasm. In discussing literacy,- they were very open to the idea of literacy being developed in their vernacular,- particularly after they were shown some of the literacy materials developed among the culturally related Kalash people[28].

Dari is also spoken as a second language in Ramgal by men over 12 years old [29] and appears to be acquired on journeys to Meterlam and Kabul to buy goods. A very small number of men can read,- either because they went to school outside the area or because they have been taught to read a little of the Qur'an in Farsi by a local mullah. There are no schools in Ramgal,-the nearest being in Meterlam. Most men appear to have a reasonably fluent command of Dari (which they always refer to as "Farsi",- never as "Dari") and regularly listen to the radio news on the (Dari) BBC Persian service. There were however noticable vocabulary gaps in certain domains,- possibly related to the lack of functional usage in this area. For example,- no one seemed to know the common Dari word /esal/ ("diarrhea"),- instead using the Kati word /pæɛʃ/. Although we wre unable to check the degree of second language acquisition by women, we were informed variously that they knew "only a little" or "none",- as they had no opportunity to use it.

*CONCLUSIONS* The language should not be seen as an insurmountable obstacle to development. Many types of projects could be begun using the trade language of Dari, However any work involving women will need to utilise Kati. Kati as understood in Ramgal is a language that is used in at least 50% of Nuristan and would repay the development of materials in health education etc within it.

## DIET

The staples of the diet are cornbread made in either 15cm diameter patties approxamately one and a half cm thick or large brown strips approxamately 45cm by 30cm which are the thickness of thin Indian

---

22) Although earlier works such as Grierson op cit grouped them with languages as far east as Kashmir in a single Dardic family,- this is now regarded as being without linguistic justification,- the languages of Nuristan being quite distinct from the others in the region. cf Strand op cit.

23) op cit.

24) Not to be confused with Kalash,- the language of the kalash kafirs of Chitral ,which is in a completely different language family (Indo-Arayan).

25) Additionally there are one or two very small pockets of other languages such as Tregami.

26) Tapes of Eastern Katerviri were played in Ramgal valley,- although we did not use a rigorous question and answer test to evaluate the level of actual comprehension, people WERE excited at hearing what they regarded as their own language on tape and claimed to be able to understand it well. However, in contrast to Strand's suggestionthat differences between Katerviri and Kamviri are principally in the voicing of certain consonants (t→d; s→z etc), - Ramgalis told us that they could not understand the taped story in Kamviri that we played them, but merely understood a few common words.

27) This is significant as Strand never visited the area but relied on a Ramgali informant living in Kabul.

28) Studies worldwide have shown that literacy even in national (ie: second) language will be achieved much quicker *overall* by a given student if it is aquired in mother tounge first,- before being attempted in a second (ie national) language. In fact many students who only seek to achieve literacy in the national language will never achieve functional literacy. In order for literacy to be an effective medium of development it is therefore essential that work be done to produce literacy materials in mother tounge. The need for this to aid development in Afghanistan was first pointed out in 1977 by M.Alam Miran, "*The functions of national languages in Afghanistan*", Afghanistan, june 1977, pp 67-77.

29) Whilst both Dari and Pushtu are used as second languages in the Pashai speaking area,- as soon as one enters Ramgal valley, only Dari is used

chappattis. Typically these are eaten with ghee (clarified butter) for breakfast and with kerut (solidified lumps of milk product) often mixed with ghee for the two remaining meals of the day. Tea (green or black) is drunk,- generally without milk. Where families own a cow milk is also drunk either warm (and in richer households with sugar) or cold. Unless a family can afford to kill a chicken,- no meat is usually eaten except in winter as the flocks are away in the upper pastures. In Lower Ramgal fish are commonly caught (by small handnet) and eaten. However in Upper Ramgal above the lake fish are much less common and so are rarely eaten[30].

During the fruit season (september- october) significant amounts of peaches and grapes are harvested and eaten, (although due to the cooler climate grapes cannot be grown in the northerly parts of Upper Ramgal such as Pushal). Significant amounts of apples are harvested during september and stored in grass to be eaten throughout the year. Mullberries and walnuts are also harvested in season and stored throughiut the year,- mullberries being deliberatly dried for this purpose. Dried mullberies are sometimes ground into flour and mixed with crushed walnuts to form a sticky fudge like sweet called in kati "firkun" (in dari "aiu").

The most disturbing aspect of the diet that we discovered was the complete absence of vegetables,- which resulted in literally everyone showing signs of anemia. Very occasionally a small number of potatoes and pumpkins are grown, howeverthere appeared to be no dark green leafy vegetables grown at all. On being repeatedly told of the need for iron intake from such sources,- the people simply replied that it was not their custom.

CONCLUSIONS; Ramgal valley appears to have the right environmental conditions to grow the right crops for a healthy diet, however there is a need for health education to make people aware of what constitutes a healthy diet.

## NUTRITIONAL STATUS OF CHILDREN

Our survey concentrated on under 5's and was limited to the extent that our results were dependent on which children were brought to us for weighing and measuring. It was therefore not possible to undertake any form of stratified or random sampling. Further whilst the survey was warmly welcomed in some villages, in other villages we had relatively few children brought to us despite visiting several locations in the village. In one village the men declared that if we hadn't brought any medicines then it was pointless our examining their children,- and refused to let us see them.

It should also be noted that our survey reflects the nutritional status of children at the end of the summer period (september),- when little if any meat has been eaten. Results may well differ when the flocks have been brought down to the villages in the winter.

Both mid upper arm circumference (MUAC) and height/weight charts were used,- eventually we concentrated on the latter as it enabled younger children to be surveyed as well and addittionally enabled us to give instant feedback in the form of health advice to the parents of malnourished children. Although the ages of children were also recorded it was decided not to use height/age statistics to analyse malnutrition as many parents were clearly somewhat uncertain in giving their children's ages. Therefore the statisitical analysis given in this report is based entirely on height/weight results. Visual examination of children for signs of both dry (marasmus) and wet (kwashiorkor) malnutrition was also undertaken.[31]

It is clear that both in Ramgal valley and in the control area of Nangaradj (further south down in the Alingar valley,- see map),- dry malnutrition amongst under 5's is a significant problem. Village results (see appendix)

---

30) There may thus be the potential to develop small scale fish farming in order to supplement summer protein (and iron) intake in the upper valley.

31) examination of limbs/knee joints for signs of swelling, eyes for signs anemia (iron deficency) and scarring caused by night blindness (indicating vitamin A deficency) and fingernails for signs of calcium deficency.

indicated between 20 and 37% of all under 5's being at least 20% malnourished.[32] In Ramgal valley this cannot be explained simply in terms of a few poor families being unable to feed their children,- as up to 89% of all under 5's were at least 10% malnourished [33]

Generally speaking, nutritional status at both 80% and 90% seem to be better in Upper Ramgal than in Lower Ramgal,- This may reflect the valley shape, (- flat bottomed "U" shaped in the upper valley and narrow bottomed "V" shaped in the lower valley- ) allowing more irrigatable land for crop growing in the upper Valley.

One major feature of the statistics is the very high percentage of children aged two and under who are at least 20% malnourished (44% in both Upper and Lower Ramgal). We believe that this primarily relates to the delayed introduction of adequete proteins. Children are usually given only mother's milk with no addittional solids until the age of two years. For this reason we have broken down our statistics into under 5's who are two and under and those who are older.

It is also significant that girls are generally better nourished than boys. Particularly in the severest cases (20%+ malnourishment) a higher percentage of malnourished boys than girls was usually found. One possible explanation of this may be that when the women take small children to the fields to work,- the girls are given extra food.[34]

Kwashiorkor (wet malnutrition) is principally found in terms of the serious anemia (iron deficency) found in literally all of the children.[35] This was based on observations of the colour of eyes and verbal information that children regularly ate dirt. There was also some possible evidence of night blindness indicating vitamin A deficency (scarring in the eyes) in a number of children, however this was in no sense as widespread as the anemia.

It seems highly probable that the anemia is principally due to the <u>complete</u> lack of green vegetables in the diet. This is not due to environmental conditions (cf section "Diet"). There is a need for basic health education here.

<u>CONCLUSIONS</u>: Ramgal valley represents an area of Afghanistan where environmental conditions (lack of available irrigatable land etc) means that the nutritional status of its children is in a marginal state. However the major nutritional problems are due to lack of knowledge concerning the nutritional needs of children. The principal need is for health education in this area rather than for any form of supplementary feeding programme.

## <u>MEDICAL</u>

The nearest medical facilities of any nature are in Meterlam or Kabul. As the Kabul route is more arduous and closed during the winter,- Meterlam is more likely to be used. However only *some* of the extremely sick are ever taken to Meterlam,- usually on a donkey. This is a journey likely to take one to one and a half weeks and probably longer during winter if it is attempted at all (see section "access"). Many of the severely sick are never taken to medical help not only due to te distance, but also due to the lack of readily available "spare money" in a largely subsistence economy. Journeys are made to the nearest shop (Gandalabag in the Alingar valley) to buy medicines for sick relatives. However as the people have

---

32) It is however, not a *critical* problem (ie: crisis point);- 70% of reference height/weight is conventionally accepted as being the critical cut off point indicating that an individual child is so severely malnourished as to face an increased risk of death (cf S.Simmons ed; <u>Refugee community health care</u>, OUP,Oxford, 1983, chapter 5). However children such as those seen in Ramgal are likely to lack resistence to infection, get more seriously ill and take longer to get better than a well nourished child. "Measles, tuberculoses and other infectious diseases are far more dangerous for these malnourished children. More of them die." (David Werner, <u>Where there is no doctor</u>, Macmillan, London, 1993, p112) cf comments in "Medical" section of this report on some of these diseases reaching epidemic proportions amongst children in Ramgal periodically.

33) Although it may be significant that in Atarara,- a village that appeare to be slightly more prosperous,- only 48% of under 5's were 10% or more malnourished.

34) Regrettably this gender imbalance was only discovered in subsequent data analysis,- consequently we were unable to verify this hypothesis in the field.

35) In the youngest babies it was clearly maternally derived anemia,- indicating a problem wider than the child population.

essentially no medical knowledge at all themselves and no qualified medical advice is available at the point of purchase,- this may be at best a questionable practice.

The following analysis of significant health problems in Ramgal valley is based on a) verbal questioning of village leaders,- and therefore represents their own diagnosis of the disease in question. b) Our own observations of sick people,- which were supported by reference to a medical textbook in the field,[36]- although no member of our team possessed formal medical qualifications. In the case of the former the terms used by the villagers themselves are used, whereas where our own diagnosis is concerned this is made clear by the symptoms being described as well.

Almost all villages reported instances of cholera with about 5% of the population dying in any given outbreak. There appeared to be little if any knowledge of the way this disease is spread or of the need to boil all water during an outbreak or of the need for infected persons to maintain adequete body fluid intake. Malaria was also reported in all villages surveyed. A disease that was described to us as typhus ("morika" in dari) but from the description of the symptoms could equally have been measles occurred in - epidemic proportions every few years. Thus in Chutor,- a village in Upper Ramgal of approxamately 100 families (8-12 per household) it was reported to us that 500 people had died this year from this disease and malaria. A disease whose symptoms when described closely resembled those of whooping cough also occasionally reached epidemic proportions, thus in Pushal,- the largest village (approxamately 800 households) we were told that about three years ago this disease killed 40% of the child population and last year another 400 children died from it,- conseqently there were very few under three's in Pushal this year. Swollen stomachs in children were common,- proably indicating widespread worm infestation and a disease where the knee joints locked occured in a number of adults[37]. In Lower Rangal many people particularly children suffered from bites caused by small (1cm) black flies that could bite through skin and draw blood in less than two minutes. Children tend to scratch these bites because they itch severely and consequently develop large sores on their arms and legs. Addittionally some of these appear to carry an infection as a proportion of these bites develop into blisters that continue to produce yellow pus even when drained for some considerable time afterwards[38]. There is clearly a need for some form of vector control here to wipe out the breeding grounds.

Iodine deficency goitre occurs in Ramgal but is substantially less prevalent than in other parts of Nuristan[39]. Thus in a medium sized village (Atarara) of an estimated 50-60 families, it was reported to us that there were only six cases of goitre. The reasons for this high degree of variation from a neighbouring part of Nuristan are not yet clear[40]

Mortality rates for under 5's were variously estimated at between 10% and 30% of children dying before reaching five years old. The variation may well be due to annual fluctations,- thus in Pushal we were told that usually 90% survive to age five,- but sometimes all die and last spring 50% died.

Maternal mortality rates were hard to estimate due to our lack of detailed contact with the women, however in Pushal (Population estimated at 6000) eight women had died in childbirth so far that year (september).

We observed or were informed of a number of "dangerous" local medical practices.. These included:- killing a goat and wrapping the fresh skin around a wound or broken bone to heal it[41]; Following the cutting the umbilical cord of newborn babies (either by burning or with an unsterilised knife) then ghee is placed on the cut cord; Following circumcision (between the ages of two and seven depending on the village,- all boys are circumcised together) ash from a burnt cloth is placed on the boys' penis as there is "much blood". The actual circumcision is done with an unsterilised knife. When children have stomach complaints,- their diarrhea is burnt then spread thickly over their entire abdoman and chest, which is then

---

36) David Werner, Where there is no doctor, Macmillan, London, 1993.
37) this may have been tetanus, however the patients that we observed in this condition appeared to have no difficulty speaking or pain in their jaws.
38) We too suffered from this and found that the blisters only subsided and stopped producing pus when we were able to treat them with antibiotics approxamately two weeks later.
39) Kathleen Cita, working in central Nuristan reported 90% of the adult female population, 20-30% of males and occasionally children suffering from iodine deficency goitre.
40) The implication is that an environmental source other than marine derived precipitation is providing iodine in Ramgal but not in the valleys of central Nuristan,- only a short distance away.
41) On enquiry we were told that it was believed that it was the skin being wrapped round the wound or limb than effected the cure,- rather than the killing of the goat itself. This is therefore primarily regarded as a "medical" rather than as a primarily folk islamic practice.

covered with polythene. On being told of the dangers of this particular practice,- the people simply commented "it is our custom".

Naswar (a mild drug used widely in Afghanistan) is grown on small private plots in many of the villages, however we observed no evidence of addiction to other forms of drugs[42].

CONCLUSIONS: Although the felt need of the community is very clearly that they desperately want "a clinic". Our assessment is that the primary need is for preventitive medicine,- in particular a vaccination programme and health education. Without the latter the same problems,-such as worms are likely to recur as soon as treatment has been completed. However at the moment the people are not open to the idea of change of lifestyle to promote healthier living,-there is a need for something to stimulate this interest. There is of course also a need for actual medical care within the community, however this needs to be sustainable and in the present circumstances this might be better achieved by training village health care workers from the community itself rather than seeking to merely place within the valley medically qualified personnel from outside,- who would inevitably only stay for limited periods of time.

## WATER SUPPLY AND SANITATION

Adequete water supply is one of the strongest felt needs of each village that we visited in Ramgal. This is due to the lack of land that is capable of being irrigated. The local people have built long irrigation channels taking water from upstream in the river or springs on the hillside in order to provide water for fields otherwise above the level of the river. Nevertheless there is still a lack of adequete irrigated arable land. More land could be irrigated by blasting channels through the rocky outcrops that frequently make up the valley sides,- however in many cases this would require a substantial quantity of dynamite. Villagers have however in some instances travelled to Meterlam and purchased dynamite in order to blast through rock themselves and claim to have a certain degree of expertise in the use of dynamite.

Sanitation is basic, although most houses in Upper Ramgal had latrines attached to their houses. These consisted of a walled and roofed platform at the level of the first storey above ground level with an uncovered hole that dropped down to an open space approxamately 3m below. We were told that once a year the accumulated night soil is spread on the fields as fertiliser. In Lower Ramgal valley some drop pit latrines were also used, however the most frequent practice was to use the cornfields directly for defecation. There was little if any understanding of the need to seperate by a reasonable distance sewage disposal and drinking water supply, in one village the men simply laughed when it was suggested that using the river (their only water supply) directly as a latrine might be unwise.

CONCLUSIONS :There is clearly a need for the introduction of covered deep ventilated pit latrines a proper distance from the water supply,- however basic health education will be needed prior to this to convince the people of the need for such.

Water supply for irrigation is a major need as it is likely that if more irrigated land became available, then not only could more crops be grown, but at that point in time the people might be more open to changing their farming patterns and growing a wider diet of crops including vegetables. At the moment this would appear to be a high cost operation, however more detailied research needs to be done on the hydrology and hydrogeology of the area to establish the feasability and likely cost-benefits of doing this.

---

42) cf the situation in Eastern Nuristan where opium and heroin addiction are relatively common cf The drug addicts survey of Nuristan, THE WOK FOUNDATION (1995)

## CONCLUSIONS

Ramgal valley in Western Nuristan represents one of the least developed regions in one of the least developed countries in the world. Unlike the rest of Afghanistan The area does not need reconstruction,- for the simple reason that there is nothing there to reconstruct. The area has never had any infrastructure,- not only are there no medical or educational facilities (the nearest being a week's walk away) there is not even a road accessable to the valley without several days walk.

The people feel that they have been ignored by sucessive governments and are very open to the idea of outsiders coming in to help them.

**Macro scale**

The primary need is for adequete road access as this is likely to stimulate a number of NGO's to seriously consider setting up development projects within the valley (in fact the lack of adequete access is the reason that that several NGO's have decided not to work in Ramgal). This would be a substantial undertaking, however a first step would be the repair of the road built during the time of the Daud republic as far as Piar. This would provide access to the bottom of Ramgal valley and to the whole of Ramgal and Kulam valleys within one and half to two days walking. Such a project would require major governmental funding, however we would encourage NGO's with appropriate expertise in this area to seriously consider this,- as it is the form of assisitance most likely to "kick start" other desperately needed development projects beginning in the area.

**Meso/micro scale**

The primary percieved need of the community is that they need "a clinic". However our assessment of the situation is that the primary need is for preventitive (rather than curative) medicine,- in particular a vaccination programme and an ongoing health education programme. Without the latter any form of curative medicine would have only limited effectiveness. Unfortunately at the moment the moment the people do not see the need for a change of lifestyle in order to live healthier lives and so need something to stimulate their interest in health education. Some form of on-site medical expertise is clearly also desperately needed,- however this needs to be sustainable and ongoing. It would thus seem to be important to train local people as village health care workers who will remain in their communities,- rather than to rely on medically qualified outsiders who whose stay in the area will inevitably be limited. Theo training of such, may however require a certain level of literacy within at least some of the local population,- a situation that does not currently exist. The local people have expressed some interest in literacy and if done in their own language (for which they show marked enthusiasm) could well be both the *means* to stimulate interest *and* the medium for other forms of development such as health education. More research needs to be done on the feasability of developing literacy materials in the local language.

Water supply is another area that needs further research,- as anything that increases the amount of irrigated land available for agriculture is likely to improve the nutritional status of the area.

***Acknowledgement***

The help and assistance of the following is gratefully acknowledged;-

Dag Hansen and Mohammed Ismail my two co-workers (the latter joining SERVE specifically for this survey trip) without whom this survey would not have been possible. The Governor and shura of Laghman who facilitated our travel north of Meterlam. Doug Blanton, Director of the relief and development department of SERVE who did much backroom work that made this survey possible. Dr Toni Grosshauser, director O.R.A. who gave us valuable advice from his own earlier visit to part of this area and Dr. Yousaf Nuristani, Director A.A.I.D. who who gave much valuable advice and assistance that made this survey possible. Lastly the people of Ramgal valley who generously provided us with food, accomodation and guides without cost during the course of our stay in Ramgal.

**APPENDIX 1**

**CHILD NURTRITION STATISTICAL SURVEY**

**PUSHAL (Upper Ramgal valley)**

~ 20% of all under 5`s at least 20% malnourished.
(gender breakdown and under 2 / 2-5 breakdown not statistically significant due to small sample size)

~ 80% Of all under 5`s at least 10% malnourished.

( all children are badly anaemic i.e. iron deficiency)
( 2 cases of possible night blindness i.e. vitamin A deficiency)
( no children more than 20% malnourished were found in the sample)

**ATARARA (Upper Ramgal valley)**

~ 28% of all under 5`s,- at least 20% malnourished
(boys 36%; girls 21%)
~ 48% of all under 5`s at least,- 10% malnourished
(boys 36%; girls 57%) i.e. all boys 10%+ malnourished are actually 20% or more malnourished.

~ 44% of twos and under,- at least 20% malnourished
(sample size too small for statistically significant gender breakdown)

~ 56% of twos and under,- at least 10% malnourished
(sample size too small for gender breakdown)

~ 19% of under 5`s (excluding twos and under),- at least 20% malnourished.

~ 44% of under 5`s (excluding twos and under),- at least 10% malnourished.

(one child, -male 18months- was 70% malnourished)
(all children were badly anaemic)
(some possible night blindness i.e. vitamin A deficiency)

**KORADJ (Lower Ramgal valley)**

~37% of all under 5`s,- at least 20% malnourished.
(boys 38%; girls 36%)

~89% of all under 5`s,- at least10% malnourished.
(boys 100%; girls 64%)

~44% of twos and under,- at least 20% malnourished.
(boys 33%; girls 50%)

~90% of twos and under ,- at least 10% malnourished.
(boys 100%; girls 50%)

~30% of under 5`s (excluding twos and under),- at least 20% malnourished.
(boys 40%; girls 20%)

~90% of under 5`s (excluding twos and under),- at least 10% malnourished.
(boys 100%; girls 80%)

(no children more than 20% malnourished were found in the sample)
(all children were badly anaemic)
(two children in the sample had either scars or yellow rings in their eyes,- indicating possible vitamin A deficiency).

**CONTROL SAMPLE:- NANGARADJ (mid upper Alingar valley,- Pashai area)**
**(approximately 30km north of Meterlam)**

~32% of all under 5`s,- at least 20% malnourished.
(boys 33%; girls 30%)

~41% of all under 5`s,- at least 10% malnourished.
(breakdown into data for twos and under yields too small a sample size to be significantly relevant).

~28% of all under 5`s (excluding under twos),- at least 20% malnourished.
(boys 30%; girls 25%)

(most children are anaemic)
(many children have yellow eyes with scarring,- we were told that all children there have this problem,- indicating possible night blindness,- a symptom of vitamin A deficiency).

# APPENDIX 2

## NURISTAN

RANGAL VALLEY



HINDU KUSH RANGE

ATARAA GARH

KORADJ

Puchal

Kulam

KANTIWAR

PECH DARRA

LAGHMAN

TAJIK

KUNAR

Pier

Shitur

Mandul

Nangarej

Badiabad

Maidan

Kalatumiraj

Tigri

Karwach Khana

Kaujan

Alingar

AFGHANISTAN

Map to illustrate a journey in

NURISTAN

by Wilfred Thesiger

Miles

0 5 10

Route ... Heights in Feet

U. S. S. R.

CASPIAN SEA

Aral Sea

Baku

Tehran

Kashgar

PERSIA

AFGHANISTAN

Kabul

Jalalabad

PAKISTAN

INDIA

Delhi

Karachi

ARABIAN SEA

PERSIAN GULF

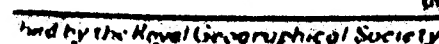
CHINA

TIBET

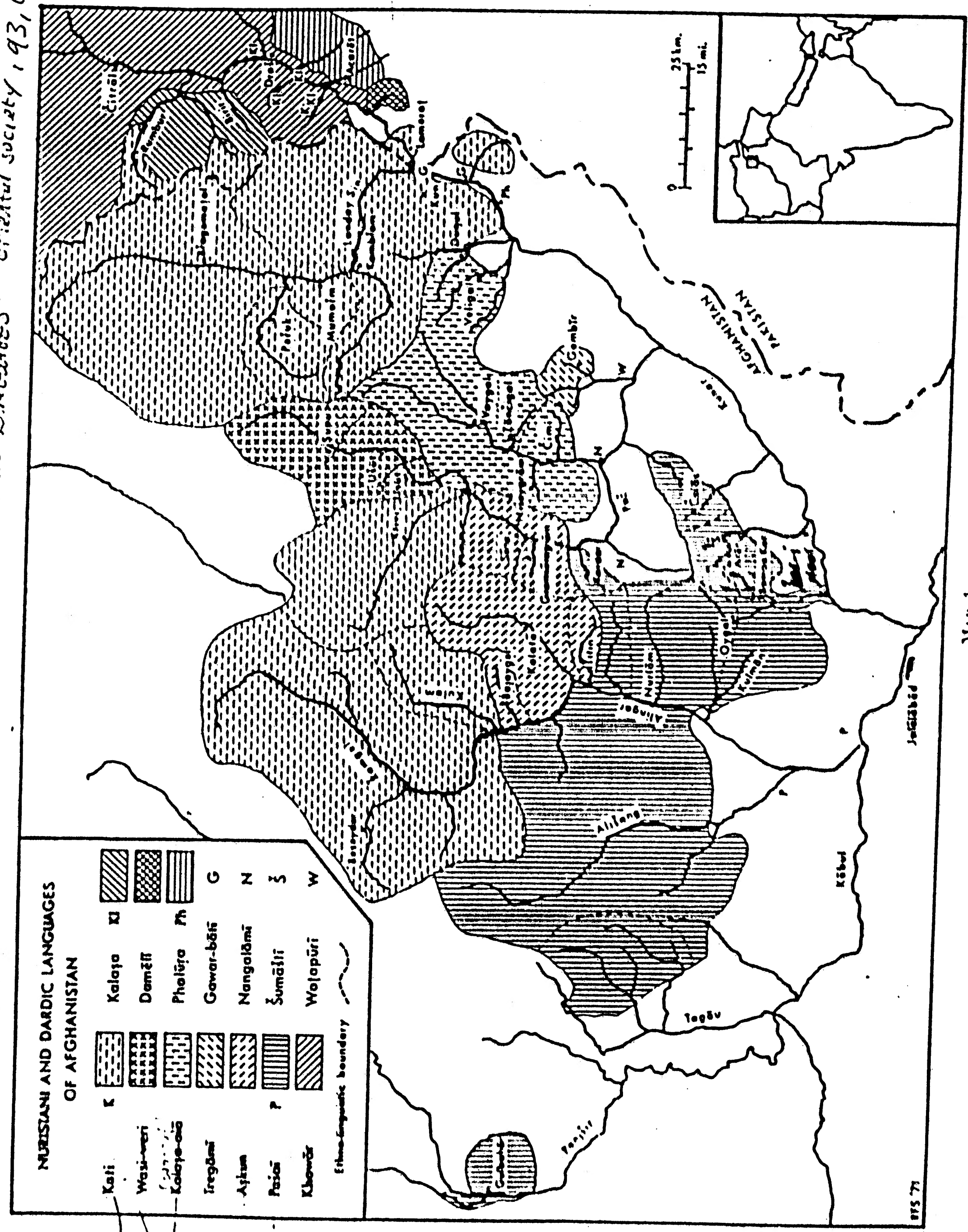
ed by the Royal Geographical Society

THESIGER





From: Richard Strand "Notes on Nuristani and Dardic Languages" Journal of American Oriental Society, 93, (1973) pp 297–301




MAP 1

APPENDIX 3

## LIST OF VILLAGES IN UPPER RAMGAL NORTH OF GADWAL

( - GIVEN BY LOCAL INFORMANT, - WHO DID NOT INCLUDE "THE SMALLEST VILLAGES" )

N.B. AS ELSEWHERE IN THIS REPORT, WORDS GIVEN BETWEEN HASH MARKS (i.e. / / ) ARE WRITTEN IN I.P.A. (INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET) SCRIPT, - AS THE ONLY WAY TO ENSURE ACCURATE PHONETIC TRANSCRIPTION OF "NEW" WORDS.

/ɣadwul/
/ʃɑɣanal/
/rustu/
/dʒenoxel/
/tup xana/
/aterəo/
/sɑikela/
/taikəma/
/manɟur/
/ptʃeleidəra/
/nalu/
/ʃaɟɪn/
/skul/
/pʉtʃɑl/
/ptʃeɣadi/
4) /ɣdʒdɪn/
/rəmna/
/lustugʉm/
/balako/
/dʒespol/
/pʉtʃɑl/ - "Capital" of Ramgal, - estimated population 6,000.
/ɑrzna/
/ʃɔlɑʃuwa/
/ptʃkul/
/ʃɑrmʉ/
/lowkɪnə/
/ɑkɑti/
/mneʃir/